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F. H. Jacobi on faith, or what it takes to be an irrationalist

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Abstract: F. H. Jacobi (1743–1819), a key figure in the philosophical debates at the close of the eighteenth century in Germany, has long been regarded as an irrationalist for allegedly advocating a blind 'leap of faith'. The central claim of this essay is that this venerable charge is misplaced. Following a reconstruction of what a charge of irrationalism might amount to, two of Jacobi's most important works, the *Spinoza Letters* (1785) and *David Hume* (1787), are scrutinized for traces of irrationalism. Far from being an irrationalist, Jacobi is best read as questioning the analytical-geometrical model of rationality popular among his contemporaries, and of proposing a more naturalistic theory of rationality that situates it more firmly in human psychology, the ultimate import of which lies in a reconceptualization of the relation between faith and reason.

> Pantheism is the clandestine religion of Germany, as was predicted fifty years ago by those German writers who campaigned so intensively against Spinoza. The fiercest of these opponents of Spinoza was Fr. Heinr. Jacobi, who is occasionally honoured by being named among the German philosophers. He was nothing but a quarrelsome sneak, who, disguising himself in a philosopher's cloak, made his way in among the philosophers, first whimpering to them about his love and his tender soul, and then letting loose against reason. His refrain always went: philosophy, knowledge through reason, is a vain delusion; reason does not even itself know where it leads; it brings one into a dark labyrinth of error and contradiction; and only faith can lead one securely. That mole! He did not see that reason is like the eternal sun, which, as it makes its steady way above, illuminates its own path with its own light. Nothing compares to the pious, smug hatred little Jacobi harboured for the great Spinoza.[1]

These famous lines from the sardonic pen of Heinrich Heine more or less capture the widely held judgement of posterity on F. H. Jacobi (1743–1819), one of the more enigmatic products of late eighteenth-century German letters. The essence of the charge, buried in Heine's bombast, is that Jacobi is an *irrationalist*. Heine was by no means the first to suggest as much. Moses Mendelssohn, with whom Jacobi

initiated a famous exchange of letters that eventually culminated in the so-called 'Spinoza dispute', also charges Jacobi with advocating irrationality and 'blind faith', albeit indirectly.[2] Likewise Kant, in his contribution to this important debate, suggests that Jacobi 'overturns reason' by holding that belief in God can be based on an 'intuition' prior to all rational investigation.[3]

The younger generation of literati was by no means to be outdone in casting aspersions upon Jacobi. In his review of a later edition of Jacobi's novel *Woldemar*, Friedrich Schlegel asserts that Jacobi 'hates philosophical reason', and that his 'positive theory of faith simply cannot be taken to be philosophical'.[4] More recently, scholars have begun to take Jacobi more seriously as an important player in the formation of post-Kantian German philosophy.[5] Still, Frederick C. Beiser, in his rightly respected discussion of this period, argues that Jacobi advocates a 'leap of faith' and that Mendelssohn's judgement of Jacobi as 'just another *Schwärmer*, another pietistic mystic who wanted to debunk reason and to convert him to an irrational form of Christianity' has some ring of truth to it.[6] On Beiser's reading, Jacobi presented his contemporaries with the following dilemma:

> ... either we follow our reason and become atheists and fatalists; or we renounce our reason and make a leap of faith in God and freedom. In more general terms, we have to choose either a rational skepticism or an *irrational* faith. There is simply no comforting middle path between these options, no way to justify morality and religion through reason.[7]

Other historians of the period tend to be more nuanced in their judgements of Jacobi. For example, in his magisterial history of German idealism, Terry Pinkard acknowledges that the traditional reading of Jacobi is a caricature, and that Jacobi belongs to a long tradition of philosophers who, while sceptical of claims made on behalf of reason, could hardly be called irrationalists.[8] More than anyone else, however, George di Giovanni has argued passionately for a radical reassessment of Jacobi's position. Di Giovanni maintains that Jacobi 'never intended to foster irrationalism'.[9] I think that Pinkard and di Giovanni are correct in advocating a revision of the traditional view of Jacobi. In the present essay, my aim is to contribute to the cause by filling in some of the details left out by Jacobi's modern advocates. In so doing, my primary focus is on the implications of Jacobi's position for the epistemology of religious belief.

My argument proceeds as follows. First, I offer a plausible account of what a charge of 'irrationalism' might really amount to. In the remainder of my discussion, I measure Jacobi's position in two of his most important and influential works – *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn* (1785) and *David Hume on Faith, or Idealism and Realism, A Dialogue* (1787) – against this conception of irrationalism.[10] I argue that Jacobi does not have what it takes to be considered an irrationalist, at least by this plausible account of what irrationalism means. Instead, Jacobi is guilty only of questioning, and proposing

an alternative to, a paradigm of rationality on which 'reason' just means deductive or 'analytic' patterns of inference. In place of this paradigm, Jacobi offers a more naturalistic theory of rationality that situates it more firmly in human psychology, and he does so in order to articulate a new understanding of the relation between faith and reason.

What it takes to be an irrationalist

'Irrationalism' functions in most philosophical discourse more as a blunt instrument than as a finely tooled one. As one might expect, it is difficult to spell out any precise view that goes by this name. However, there are a few general associations attached to the term that more or less fix the boundaries of its application. I do not pretend here to be giving an exhaustive account of these associations, but only to delineate those that might be relevant to the traditional labelling of Jacobi as an irrationalist.

'Irrationalism' often connotes a tendency toward or advocacy of arbitrariness in one's beliefs and decisions. The thought is that an irrationalist is someone who simply plumps for a particular belief or course of action without considering reasons for or against it. An irrationalist is a person prone to 'leaps' rather than to inferences. As in the passage quoted above from Beiser, this seems to be part of the common reading of Jacobi. The famous *salto mortale* that he recommends to Lessing during their reported conversation is typically taken to be a 'leap of faith'. Another idea closely associated with arbitrariness is that 'irrationalism' is a view that substitutes private whim or wishful thinking for rational conviction. That is, an irrationalist cares more about what she wants to be true than what reason might warrant.

Irrationalism also suggests a sort of denigration of reason. The idea is that the deliverances of reason are irrelevant, immaterial, or worthless. Put in religious terms, the thought is that human reason is limited and corrupt and so has no rights over divine revelation. Allied with this denigration of reason is an aversion to critical enquiry, particularly when it is directed at one's cherished beliefs. This is often joined with a kind of counter-evidentialism. Counter-evidentialism goes beyond the claim that some beliefs or courses of action can be justified even when evidence is weak or absent to endorse the claim that they can justified even if the evidence against them is overwhelming. Another version of this counsels the adoption of beliefs or courses of action that are manifestly incoherent. This is captured by the famous misquote from Tertullian, *credo quia absurdum*.[11]

My primary contention in the present essay is that none of these senses of irrationalism can be applied to Jacobi's stated views in the *Spinoza Letters* and *David Hume*. In defending this claim, I also have occasion to spell out Jacobi's position on the nature of religious commitment and on its relation to reason.

Interpreting Jacobi

Before exploring Jacobi's texts, a brief word is in order regarding the difficulty of reading them. Much of the blame for Jacobi's reputation as an obscurantist mystic and enemy of reason must ultimately be placed on his own shoulders. The two primary philosophical works that I discuss here, the *Spinoza Letters* and *David Hume*, can hardly be called systematic philosophical treatises. Particularly in the former, Jacobi leaps from argument to argument, intimation to intimation, often without developing his ideas beyond the most cursory of treatments. The *David Hume* is a dialogue, and so has a clearer argumentative trajectory to it, but it, too, has its obscurities.

The experience of reading Jacobi is perhaps best likened to listening to certain musical compositions. Rather than tracing out a lockstep progression of ideas, one follows along as best one can while themes are introduced and arguments developed, only to be dropped abruptly. At the same time, there is a sort of progressive clarification and illumination, so that, once one has come to the end, a fairly clear set of ideas has come into relief, and one possesses a much better grasp of how each piece fits into a coherent whole. In light of these qualities of his work, I have adopted the following approach to exposition. First, I treat the two texts, the *Spinoza Letters* and *David Hume*, separately, in order to trace out the development of the argument internal to each. Second, I have been selective in the passages that I have chosen to explain, not out of desire to avoid passages that might present difficulties for my interpretation, but rather in order to bring out the central phases of the respective arguments most vividly. Finally, at the conclusion of each section, I reiterate the substance of these various phases and describe how they form a coherent view.

The *Spinoza Letters*

The first phase of Jacobi's argument in this justly famous text is ostensibly concerned with the limits of explanation. Jacobi announces that 'I love Spinoza, because he, more than any other philosopher, has led me to the perfect conviction that certain things admit of no explication: one must not therefore keep one's eyes shut to them, but must take them as one finds them' (*MPW*, 193). In particular, Jacobi has in mind our sense of ourselves as moral agents who posit ends and act for the sake of them. Spinoza, of course, famously argues that this sense, founded as it is on a notion of free or self-determining agency, is illusory. In Spinoza's universe, everything is necessary. The problem, as Jacobi sees it, is that Spinoza transgresses the boundaries of his own system when, in parts 4 and 5 of the *Ethics*, he turns to sketching an ideal of human conduct. Jacobi puts it this way:

> Spinoza also had to wriggle quite a bit to hide his fatalism when he turned to human conduct, especially in his fourth and fifth parts [of the *Ethics*] where I could say that he

> degrades himself to a sophist here and there. – And that's exactly what I was saying: even the greatest mind, if it wants to explain all things absolutely, to make them rhyme with each other according to distinct concepts and will not otherwise let anything stand, must run into absurdities. (*MPW*, 194)

For Jacobi, the recognition that rational explanation runs aground on human agency is a liberating discovery. With this recognition one 'gains the greatest room within oneself for genuine human truth' (*MPW*, 194). What, then, is Jacobi after in these remarks? His claim is that our rationality, as modelled by Spinoza's geometric method, is in fact conditioned by factors outside it. To reason properly about morality, one must begin with our sense of ourselves as personal agents. Abstract systems, such as the one devised by Spinoza, fail precisely at this point to the extent that they have abstracted away from this sense of agency.[12] The impersonal, impartial, general nature of a system like Spinoza's makes it difficult to see how someone would actually be *motivated* to adopt the course of life that he recommends. There must be something outside the abstract system that lends it urgency and import, and, Jacobi suggests, that thing is our concrete sense of moral agency. The problem, however, is that Spinoza's system cannot make sense of the one thing that gives it urgency and import.

At this point, the charge of irrationalism becomes explicit in Jacobi's reported conversation with Lessing. Lessing's worry is that, by making something outside the rational system explanatorily prior to the conclusions of the system itself, Jacobi is advocating an arbitrary leap of faith. This is how Jacobi reports the exchange:

> Lessing: Words, dear Jacobi, words! The boundary [between the comprehensible and the incomprehensible] that you want to establish does not allow of determination. And moreover, you give free play to phantasies, nonsense, obscurantism. [Jacobi]: I believe that that boundary can be defined. I have no intention of *establishing* a boundary, but only of finding one that is already established and leaving it in place. And as for nonsense, phantasies, obscurantism … . Lessing: These are to be found wherever confused concepts rule. [Jacobi]: And even more where *fictitious* concepts do. Even the blindest, most nonsensical faith, if not the stupidest, finds its high throne there. For once one has fallen in love with certain explanations, one accepts blindly every consequence that can be drawn from an inference that one cannot invalidate – even if one must walk on one's head. (*MPW*, 194)

In essence, Jacobi's response is that, by recognizing extra-rational constraints or conditions on rationality, he is in no way licensing absurdity. Instead, absurdity results when a person substitutes the purely formal demands of the rational system for, in this case, our sense of moral agency.

This is the import of Jacobi's infamous *salto mortale*, which, contrary to the common view, does not refer to a 'leap of faith' at all, but rather to a kind of somersault perfected by Italian circus performers. To privilege formal demands over the conditions that give them substance is to get things backward or upside down. The *salto mortale* is not a blind leap of faith in favour of some arbitrary,

if cherished view. Instead, it is a return to normality. In this instance, this requires a recognition that our sense of moral agency is what gives definition to the patterns of inference that constitute the system. But if the sense of moral agency is eliminated because of the formal demands of the system, then the system loses any connection with what Jacobi calls 'genuine human truth'. Jacobi makes much the same point when, at a later point in the text, he avers that 'What I have stood and shall stand for, however, is not Spinoza and his system; it is rather the dictum of Pascal: *La nature confound les Pyrrhoniens, & la raison les Dogmatistes*' (*MPW*, 204). The particularly crucial part of this quotation is the first, 'nature contradicts the Pyrrhonists'. Scepticism, like Spinozistic determinism, is the result of an insistence on the formal demands of the system at the expense of the actual condition of human beings in the real world.[13]

Jacobi is not merely saying that we ought to stick to our cherished convictions even when they disagree with the best deliverances of reason. Traditionally, this has been regarded as the sum total of his contribution to the philosophical debates of his era. In actuality, his point is considerably more subtle. Why, Jacobi asks, do we care about the rationality of our moral judgements or about the achievement of certainty in the first place? The answer cannot lie in the systematic, formal reflections that proceed only on the basis of the antecedent concern in question. Instead, moral theory (to stick to Jacobi's main example here) is anchored in a non-theoretical sense or sentiment of our own agency. The problem is not so much that philosophical theories undermine our cherished beliefs, but that they undermine *themselves* by becoming detached from what motivates the philosophical enterprise in the first place. Somewhere along the way this anchoring motivation has been forgotten or replaced by some formal demands that are internal to the reflective system.

As the discussion proceeds, Jacobi expands upon this basic line of argument with a regress argument. He famously writes:

> My dear Mendelssohn, we are all born in the faith, and we must remain in the faith, just as we are all born in society, and must remain in society: *Totum parte prius esse necesse est.* – How can we strive for certainty unless we are already acquainted with certainty in advance, and how can we be acquainted with it except through something that we already discern with certainty? … . Conviction by proofs is certainty at second hand. … . But if every *assent to truth* not derived from rational grounds is faith, then conviction based on rational grounds must itself derive from faith and must receive its force from faith alone. (*MPW*, 230)

Here, Jacobi is making a point familiar to foundationalists, but with an important twist. Foundationalism is typically motivated by a concern with the so-called 'basing relation' between propositions. On this view, propositions are justified by other propositions on which the former are 'based'. This leads to a potential regress, which can only be halted if there are some primary or 'properly basic' propositions that provide the bases for all the others.

Jacobi's point is clearly parallel to this familiar line of reasoning. His claim is that a philosophical system, such as Spinoza's, is a pattern of inferential relations between propositions. But why, he wonders, accept the assumptions that comprise the bases for this pattern? By itself, no such pattern is self-warranting. To hold that a particular pattern (say, Spinoza's theory) is self-warranting is, once more, to confuse formal demands that obtain of relations between propositions with the extra-rational conditions that make it possible both to (1) accept the basic commitments that motivate the system, and (2) to see the force of the inferential connections that link its constituent propositions. Jacobi's name for the extra-rational conditions that anchor a system of relations between propositions is *faith*. 'Through faith', he asserts, 'we know that we have a body, and that there are other bodies and other thinking beings outside us' (*MPW*, 231). Driving home his point about the importance of these conditions, he tells Mendelssohn that 'We obtain all representations, therefore, *simply through modifications that we acquire*; there is no other way to real cognition, for wherever reason gives birth to *objects*, they are all just chimeras' (*MPW*, 231).

How does this general view relate to the epistemology of religion? First of all, Jacobi contends that rational demonstrations of God's existence simply explicate the relations between propositions. They do not, thereby, compel anyone to accept the initial propositions. Instead, a particular extra-rational factor, which Jacobi describes as a modification of our sense of moral agency, does the important work of anchoring them. Paraphrasing the Dutch Platonist Hemsterhuis, with whom Jacobi also corresponded extensively, he asserts that 'the occasional occurrence in the soul of even one aspiration for the better, for the future and the perfect, is a better proof of the Divinity than any geometric proof' (*MPW*, 214). He goes on to quote Plato and Hemsterhuis to this effect:

> You know what Plato wrote to Dion's friends: 'For regarding divine things, there is no way of putting the subject into words like other studies. Acquaintance with it must come rather after a long period of attendance to instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship with it, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining.' You say almost the same thing in the *Aristee*, namely, 'that the conviction of the feeling from which all other convictions are derived, is born within the very essence, and cannot be communicated.' But must not the feeling that lies at the ground of this conviction be found in all men, and should it not be possible to liberate it to some extent in those who appear to be destitute of it, by working to remove the hindrances that inhibit its effective action? (*MPW*, 214)

The import of both the paraphrase of Hemsterhuis quoted above, and the longer passage on both Plato and Hemsterhuis, is that religious conviction is grounded in a kind of moral sentiment or 'aspiration' as Jacobi calls it. Such a sentiment or aspiration is the sort of thing that requires immediate acquaintance. It can hardly be captured, much less exhausted, by a system of formal relations between propositions. Importantly, Jacobi also insists that this sentiment is in no

way private or idiosyncratic. Individual whim or caprice are not being offered here as substitutes for genuine rational conviction. Instead, Jacobi is appealing to what he takes to be a more or less universal sense of ourselves as moral agents who are called upon to pursue a 'higher' purpose.[14] There are striking parallels between what Jacobi has to say here and John Henry Newman's discussion, almost a century later, about how people form a 'real apprehension' of the being of God.[15] Newman argues that the conscience, the sense of a 'sanction' involved in feelings attended on the apprehension of our own conduct is the psychological foundation of religious conviction. This sense may be more or less developed or articulate, but it can hardly be said to be an idiosyncratic part of the psychological make-up of some small minority of people.

Jacobi expands upon his basic point a bit later in the exchange with Mendelssohn. He writes that 'The religion of the Christians instructs man how to take on qualities through which he can make progress in his existence and propel himself to a higher life – and with this life to a higher consciousness, in this consciousness to a higher cognition' (*MPW*, 231). Or again, he argues that 'Man becomes aware of God through a godly life, and there is a peace of God which is higher than all reason; in this peace there is the enjoyment and the intuition of an inconceivable love' (*MPW*, 231). What Jacobi is describing here is how religious conviction and commitment come about, and how they operate subsequently within a person's psychology. There is no suggestion here that one is convinced of the truth of Christianity by some formal demonstration. Instead, conviction begins with the moral sentiment described above. Through practice, this is developed, deepened, strengthened, and cultivated. This process brings with it a growing insight into the being of God and an ever-strengthening conviction regarding the religious system that articulates this insight.

Does reason play a role in this process? Jacobi does not say. Nothing that he says here, however, precludes the possibility that it does. One must wait for his *David Hume* to see more precisely how Jacobi understands the relationship between rationality and the extra-rational factors, e.g. this moral sentiment, that condition it. Still, it seems quite reasonable to suppose that, on the picture presented by Jacobi here in the *Spinoza Letters*, the deepening and cultivation of the moral sentiment goes hand in hand with a cultivation and deepening of one's facility in reasoning about morality and religion. Rationality can be viewed here as a facility in judgement that is conditioned and enabled by extra-rational factors. Jacobi insists that the development of religious conviction leads to a 'peace' and 'intuition' that is 'higher than reason'. There is nothing here to suggest that religious conviction is *contrary* to reason. Instead, Jacobi is merely insisting that religious conviction and commitment cannot be reduced to holding certain propositions on rational grounds. Of course, Jacobi is attaching a rather large promissory note to his position. As he puts it later, 'Try to grow in virtue perfectly, that is, to exercise it *purely* and *incessantly*. Either you desist in the attempt, or

you'll become aware of God in yourself, just as you are aware of yourself' (*MPW*, 243).

Jacobi acknowledges that, to someone (like Mendelssohn, apparently) who is in the grip of a certain view of rationality, all of this will seem unintelligible or worse. But, he concludes picturesquely, so much the worse for people who are in the grip of this view:

> Reason that has fallen into poverty and has become speculative, or in other words, *degenerate* reason, can neither commend nor tolerate this practical path. It has neither hand nor foot for digging, yet it is too proud to beg. Hence it must drag itself here and there, looking for a truth that left when the contemplative understanding left, for religion and its goods – just as morality must do, looking for virtuous inclinations that have disappeared; and laws must also, looking for the fallen public spirit and the better customs, pedagogy ... . (*MPW*, 232)

Here, the claim is that a formal system cannot substitute for the vital conviction and facility of judgement that actual human dispositions and sentiments make possible. When these are lost, one is left with a *mere* system. The right move to make, according to Jacobi, is not to jettison the complex dispositions and sentiments that condition our rationality, but to reform our picture of what rationality is and how it operates. He writes:

> We do not create or instruct ourselves; we are in no way *a priori*, nor can we know or do anything *a priori*, or experience anything without ... *experience*. We find ourselves situated on this earth, and as our actions become there, so too becomes our cognition; as our moral character turns out to be, so too does our insight into all things related to it. As the heart, so too the mind; and as the mind, so too the heart. Man cannot artificially contrive through reason to be wise, virtuous, or pious: he must be *moved* to it, and yet *move* himself; he must be organically disposed to it, yet *so dispose* himself. (*MPW*, 237)

While this passage is not without its obscurities, it more or less captures Jacobi's revised view of human rationality. This view is much more thoroughly developed in the *David Hume*, as will become clear below. His basic position is that reason, regarded as the ability to discern formal relations between possible propositions, is both practically *and* theoretically inert on its own. Rationality must be 'animated', as it were, by a variety of extra-rational conditions. These conditions are not adventitious or idiosyncratic, but instead are deep features of our cognitive make-up. To ignore these features of our mental structure is, for Jacobi, to court absurdity. Is there anything 'irrationalist' about this position? Jacobi explicitly denies Lessing's charge that he is advocating nonsense. We should take this denial at face value. Jacobi is making no commitment, either explicit or implicit, to the propriety of relying on arbitrary whim in forming beliefs or practical judgements. Nor is there any hint that it is acceptable to believe in incoherent bodies of propositions. Religious commitment, on this view, hardly rests upon a blind 'leap of faith'. Instead, it is Jacobi's primary example of rationality, as it really exists, in action.

David Hume on Faith

Partly as a result of the furore caused by Jacobi's public debate with Mendelssohn regarding Lessing's alleged Spinozism, Jacobi published in 1787 a further statement and clarification of his basic position, *David Hume on Faith, or Idealism and Realism, a Dialogue*. As he had done quite briefly, and hardly to the satisfaction of all interested parties, in the *Spinoza Letters*, Jacobi considers here the charge that he is advocating 'blind faith'. He defends himself by first of all reiterating and expanding his view about the extra-rational conditions of reason. Second, he rejects a analytic-geometrical paradigm of reason, according to which only deductive inference provides the kind of support needed for philosophical and religious claims. On this paradigm, everything that falls short of the canons of strict deductive inference is inferior or second-rate. Thus, in defending 'faith' Jacobi seems to be advocating something less than genuine rationality.

Jacobi broaches this topic quite directly in the preface to this work. He writes:

> The unusual use that I made of the word 'faith' in the *Letters concerning Spinoza* refers to a need that is not mine, but a philosophy's that claims that rational knowledge does not deal just in relations, but extends to the *very existence* of things and their properties – so much so that *knowledge of actual existence* through reason would have an apodeictic certainty not ever to be ascribed to sensory knowledge. According to this philosophy there is a twofold knowledge of actual existence, one *certain* and the other *uncertain*. This latter, [as] I said [in the *Letters concerning Spinoza*], should be called 'faith.' For the assumption was that every cognition *that does not originate in rational sources* is 'faith'. (*MPW*, 255–256).

Here, Jacobi introduces the analytic-geometrical paradigm. On this view, all legitimate knowledge, not just the knowledge of formal relations between propositions, must rest upon demonstrative inference. Only such knowledge is entitled to be called 'certain'.

On this paradigm, there is another putative form of knowledge, which turns out not to be real knowledge at all. This is 'faith', an uncertain, imperfect assent to propositions in the apparent absence of strict deductive inferences to warrant the assent. Jacobi continues:

> My philosophy does not hold any such duality in the knowledge of actual existence. It claims but a single knowledge through sensation, and it restricts reason, considered by itself, to the mere faculty of perceiving relations clearly, i.e. to the power of *formulating the principle of identity and of judging in conformity to it*. With this claim, however, I am forced to admit that only the assertion of identical propositions is *apodeictic* and carries absolute certainty, and that any assertion of the existence of a thing *in itself*, outside my representation, can never be of this kind or carry absolute certainty with it. So an idealist, basing himself on this distinction, can compel me to concede that my conviction about the existence of real things outside me is only a matter of *faith*. But then, as a realist, I am forced to say that all knowledge derives exclusively from faith, for *things* must be *given* to me before I am in a position to enquire about relations. (*MPW*, 256)

Jacobi here rejects the analytic-geometrical paradigm altogether. According to Jacobi, reason is nothing more than the faculty of discerning relations between propositions, of deriving formal demands or rules from these relations, and of applying the rules in question. Taken by itself, in isolation from other features of our mental economy, reason can at best yield analytic or conceptual truths. It can tell us nothing, however, about actuality.

Jacobi's point here anticipates one made more recently by Gilbert Harman. Reason presents a rule, namely, that from p and 'if p then q', one should infer q. As Harman points out, this automatically tells us that we *must* accept q. Perhaps p is unacceptable, or perhaps 'if p then q' should be denied.[16] Or consider an example somewhat closer to Jacobi's immediate concern in the *David Hume*, i.e. the so-called epistemic closure principle: 'If, while knowing p, S believes q because S knows that p entails q, then S knows q.' Filling in the formal structure, one can restate the principle in the following form: 'If, while knowing *that she has hands*, S believes *she is not a brain in a vat* because S knows that *I have hands* entails *I am not a brain in a vat*, then S knows that *she is not a brain in a vat*.' But then the sceptic, or 'idealist' as Jacobi would call her, can point out that our unfortunate S does not, in fact, know that she is not a brain in a vat. As Jacobi puts it, 'So an idealist, basing himself on this distinction, can compel me to concede that my conviction about the existence of real things outside me is only a matter of *faith*.' Jacobi maintains that there is nothing about the formal rule captured by the epistemic closure principle that ought to *compel* a person to accept the sceptic's argument. Instead, it seems reasonable enough to hold that, at least in this case, the closure principle fails.

What Jacobi is doing is, in effect, rejecting a paradigm of rationality that was common coin in early modern philosophy. On this view, there is a distinction between knowledge in the strict sense and some lesser breed of cognition. Jacobi is reiterating his view from the *Spinoza Letters* that (1) certainty derives from immediacy, and that (2) demonstrations are only as certain as the immediate intuitions that ground them. Our belief in the external world is this sort of immediate intuition. That it cannot be demonstrated is of no consequence, since it is precisely the sort of thing that is assumed in our demonstrations. Since Jacobi does not accept the view that takes anything short of deductively licensed conclusions as somehow epistemically inferior, he is not therefore advocating a reliance on bad reasoning or groundless assumption when he appeals to faith.

This becomes clear again later on in the dialogue, when Jacobi returns explicitly to the charge that he is 'teaching blind faith and degrading reason' (*MPW*, 262). Jacobi defines such 'blind faith' as 'assent based on outward appearances, without reason or genuine insight' (*MPW*, 262). He then refers to a recent polemical pamphlet issuing from the Berlin Enlightenment circle, where 'blind faith' is taken to mean '[a]ny assent, any affirmation, that does not rest on rational

grounds' (*MPW*, 263–264). Deftly deploying Humean scepticism (hence the title of the work), Jacobi argues that, on this definition of 'blind faith', our ordinary knowledge of the external world, other minds, and our own continued existence over time become matters of 'blind faith'. The suggestion is that, if this is the consequence of a particular view of rationality, then there is a serious problem with that view. Hence, Jacobi can reject the very terms on which he has been charged with advocating 'blind faith' in this sense. Once he makes this move, it can be seen quite clearly that Jacobi nowhere advocates 'blind faith' in the remaining sense of unreflective, uncritical assent to whatever happens to come one's way.

In the remainder of the *David Hume*, Jacobi sets about dismantling the picture of human rationality that, as he sees it, motivates the charge that he is counselling an irrational, blind faith. In essence, Jacobi's argument is that the rationalist picture of human reason rests upon a faulty, dichotomous picture of human nature as a whole. On this picture, reason is somehow detached from its real-world 'home' in our organic nature.[17] When reason is understood properly, i.e. naturalistically, the identification of legitimate reasoning with abstract deductive inference begins to lose its appeal. The first move that Jacobi makes in this direction is to point out that the notion of 'pure reason' is an abstraction that is formed, like all abstractions, by emptying a concrete idea of its content. 'Just empty out your consciousness of all facts, of anything actually objective', he counsels, 'You'll then be left with just your pure reason, and you'll be able to question it without witnesses about all its secrets' (*MPW*, 300). Pure reason is thus not some *actual reason*, but an abstraction. Jacobi's suggestion, as the dialogue proceeds, is to stop short of this full abstraction in constructing a proper theory of human rationality.

In a brief discussion that is obscure even by Jacobi's standards, he constructs a naturalistic theory of reason, the upshot of which is that reason is necessarily bound to sensibility (*MPW*, 300–303). Paraphrasing Thomas Reid's reliance on 'ordinary language' in uncovering basic principles, Jacobi points out that, in German anyway, 'We derive from *Sinn* ("sense") the most characteristic forms of understanding, as well as of the lack of it' (*MPW*, 303). He approvingly quotes Leibniz on the continuum, arguing that there is a coherent chain that causally links brute matter, via organic life, to human rationality, without any breaks or interruptions (*MPW*, 307–308).

Jacobi's conclusion from this sketchy naturalistic account of rationality is that we need a substantive, less formalistic conception of reason, one that takes into account its organic context and the psychological conditions that anchor its operation (*MPW*, 319). Deliberately mocking the ideals of the Enlightenment, Jacobi avers that our reason is not a 'light', but rather an 'eye' (*MPW*, 319). 'Surely', he writes, 'the keen and serious observer cannot fail to notice that all our cognition is based on positivity, and the moment we abandon the latter, we end

up in dreams and empty fictions' (*MPW*, 320). Reason, Jacobi argues, is merely a refinement of our organic powers of sensation or perception.

The implication is that the proponents of the analytic-geometrical paradigm of reason, by discounting both sensible cognition and informal, probabilistic styles of reasoning, are committed to the fiction of a reason that exists apart from its precursors and conditions in our organic nature. Worse still, this commitment generates a faulty view of what it is worthwhile to pursue. The Enlightenment, after all, was more than just a theory of rationality, it was a social programme. Society should be rationalized, it was thought, along the lines suggested by the great advances in mathematics and physical science in the seventeenth century. Jacobi's worry, however, is that the faulty picture of reason embraced by his opponents allows for only a thin, relatively formal set of policy recommendations for the emendation and improvement of human life. Jacobi dramatizes this worry in an interesting part of the dialogue:

> *He*: ... . According to the oldest testimonies, and so too according to the most profound philosophy, our finite being must begin with the body and be constantly supported by it. Hence our reason must begin with sense-impression, and be constantly supported by it. Our natural cognition can never rise above the result of the relations of finite to finite, relations that flow into one another, back and forth without end. How foolish therefore to be surprised that we are only creatures, or indeed to be frightened by it (323–324).
> *I*: The pretensions and desires of men are odd enough. They would like to see with eyes alone, without light; and better still, they would like to see without eyes. Only then, they think, would one see *properly, truly*, and *naturally*. Where this kind of view prevails, that considers the unnatural as natural, and the natural as unnatural, there is what is called 'philosophy.' I remember this question being raised once in a company of people of different backgrounds: 'How could the human race have propagated itself without the occurrence of original sin?' A wise man quickly responded: 'Oh, by means of rational discourse no doubt!'.
> *He*: That's splendid! But what would come of our rational discourses in your opinion, if we were to find ourselves, just as we are, in a world that resembled the legendary land of plenty by the absence of all rules? (*MPW*, 324)

Jacobi's point here, though somewhat masked by his over-the-top rhetoric, is actually fairly clear and quite sensible. By making 'reason alone', where reason is understood along the lines of the analytic-geometrical paradigm reviled by Jacobi, the ruling principle of human life and of society, one does indeed promote a type of rational self-governance. Jacobi's point is that this type of self-governance is hopelessly narrow. One's actions and beliefs may well be internally consistent, but the important thing is what the *goals* or *objects* of our actions are. Jacobi observes that

> ... these strivings can be so restricted that the soul would be in a position to attain its goals by means of its reason alone, i.e. through its own self inasmuch as it (the soul) has distinct concepts. And if this state of restriction is the *Golden Age*, then it might indeed by achieved. (*MPW*, 326).

In other words, if one abstracts away from the extra-rational factors that lend urgency and importance to the project of individual and collective reform espoused by the Enlightenment, then it is relatively easy to achieve rational coherence.

A parallel example might be found in the great advances made in formal logic during the early decades of the twentieth century. Once an abstract, formal notation was devised for representing propositions at atomic inputs into computational patterns, it became possible to derive more precise rules of inference and to devise complete axiomatic systems. But, as generations of frustrated symbolic logic students can attest, it is difficult to capture the nuances of a natural language in such systems. Jacobi's claim is that something similar happens when the analytic-geometrical paradigm is adopted as the guiding principle behind moral, religious, and political reform. One is forced to abstract away entirely from the complicated concerns, intuitions, sentiments, and motivations that lend import and urgency to such reformism in the first place.

For Jacobi, it is particularly troubling that the analytic-geometrical paradigm seems to rule out specifically *religious* aims and drives as legitimate (*MPW*, 327). On Jacobi's view, such aims capture the highest aspirations of the human heart. After all, even Spinoza, for all the inexorable force of his deductions, must resort to the love of God in order to articulate the import of his system. Religious faith is not only not inferior or epistemically sub-par, according to Jacobi, it is also the expression of goals and interests that give meaning and purpose to human life. The formal requirements of a rational system can hardly function as satisfactory replacements for such goals and interests.

Conclusion

Does Jacobi have what it takes to be an irrationalist? A careful consideration of his position must lead to a negative answer. First of all, Jacobi nowhere argues that a person ought to adopt views arbitrarily, or that we ought to accept inconsistent or implausible beliefs. But this silence is far from the end of the story. Jacobi provides a well-argued case for rejecting a paradigm of rationality according to which anything short of apodictic certainty is epistemically sub-par. There is, therefore, no compelling reason for him to accept the common understanding of the dichotomy between rationality and irrationality, the understanding that was urged upon him by his contemporaries. Since Jacobi sees (to him, anyway) clear reasons for rejecting his contemporaries' view on the nature of rationality, their charge, that he advocates irrationality, loses its force.

Even this, however, is not the end of the story, for Jacobi's position is not merely a negative one. In place of the rejected analytic-geometrical paradigm, Jacobi outlines a more realistic, naturalistic account of reason. We are meant to understand from Jacobi that human reason operates under conditions (most

importantly, sensibility, which includes both sensation and sentiment), and that purely formal considerations cannot adequately substitute for these conditions. Furthermore, Jacobi clearly holds that these conditions are not *merely* unavoidable but unfortunate facts about human nature, nor are they idiosyncratic or arbitrary. Our common human nature (along with shared practices and traditions) constitute the indispensable context for the operation and application of reason to the actual world.

What does this view imply for religion? Can religion be situated within Jacobi's conception of conditioned rationality in such a way that his famous advocacy of religious faith does not degenerate into irrationalism? Jacobi's account of religious commitment would certainly be irrationalist if (1) he held that we can and should adopt religious commitments for no reason at all, or (2) despite overwhelming reasons to refrain from adopting them. Jacobi clearly does not hold either view. On his view, religious commitment is based upon our moral sensibility. We find virtue attractive and vice repellent. We have moral aspirations, and we take pleasure in contemplating them in ourselves and in others. This sensibility must be cultivated. While he certainly could be clearer on this point, Jacobi nowhere denies rationality a role in this process of cultivation. Indeed, in his literary works, especially *Edward Allwill's Collection of Letters*, Jacobi is quite critical of the Rousseauian cult of the *Herzenmensch*, the fantastical person of spontaneous natural feeling. Such a creature is, for Jacobi, just as much of a chimera as the being of pure reason that he ridicules in the *David Hume*.

Jacobi seems to be on quite solid ground on this point. It is eminently reasonable to hold that the cultivation of our sensibilities depends upon their application, particularly their application in making judgements. Unless there is something systematic to this process of cultivation, it is difficult to see how it could count as *cultivation*, rather than as blind, mechanical habituation. Jacobi's remarks in the *Spinoza Letters* make it clear that, for him anyway, the development of virtue requires deliberate effort and self-conscious reflection. He also insists that this process engenders an ever-deepening understanding of God, along with convictions of an explicitly religious nature. It is not that, on Jacobi's view, one first adopts theism willy-nilly, only later to make the happy discovery that one has made the correct choice. Instead of such a leap, Jacobi sketches a deliberate, controlled, and doubtless reasoned process of self-cultivation.

Perhaps Jacobi is too optimistic about where this process will lead. Indeed, one might think that such optimism was more well-founded in the eighteenth century than it is today. Nevertheless, neither his account of religious commitment, nor his optimism about the outcome of self-cultivation, qualifies Jacobi as an irrationalist. Religious conviction is the product of reason, shaped and conditioned by moral sensibility. As Newman famously puts it, 'Faith is the *reason* of a religious mind.'[18]

Notes

1. Heinrich Heine *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany and Other Writings*, Terry Pinkard (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 59.
2. I have in mind his comments, explicitly directed against the educational theorist Basedow, but generally thought to be aimed at Jacobi, in Lecture 8 of *Morgenstunden*. See Moses Mendelssohn *Gesammelte Schriften Jubiläumsausgabe*, III: *Schriften zur Philosophie und Ästhetik*, Leo Strauss (ed.) (Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt: Fromann-Holzboog, 1974), 71–72.
3. This diagnosis of Jacobi's position is found in Kant's famous essay 'What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?'. See Allen W. Wood and George di Giovannni (eds) *Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 15.
4. See 'Jacobis Woldemar', in Hans Eichner (ed.) *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, II: *Charakteristiken und Kritiken I (1796–1801)* (Munich: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1967), 71.
5. Anthony La Volpa summarizes many of the contemporary criticisms of Jacobi as an irrational fideist, while doing little to correct this venerable reading. See 'The philosopher and the "*Schwärmer*": on the career of a German epithet from Luther to Kant', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, **60** (1997), 85–115.
6. Frederick C. Beiser *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 46, 78–79.
7. *Ibid.*, 81. Emphasis added.
8. Terry Pinkard *German Philosophy 1760–1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 91.
9. See George di Giovanni 'Introduction: the unfinished philosophy of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi', in *idem* (ed.) *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), 49.
10. I rely here throughout on George di Giovanni's excellent translations of these two works in *Main Philosophical Writings*. I have cited Jacobi's works parenthetically in the body of the text, using the abbreviation *MPW*, followed by the pagination of the reference. On occasion, I have consulted the modern edition of Jacobi's works, Klaus Hammacher and Walter Jaeschke (eds) *Werke*, 7 vols (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1998–2006).
11. This misquotation was exposed some time ago by James Moffat in 'Aristotle and Tertullian', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 17 (1915–1916), 170–171.
12. Jacobi's position here has some parallels to more recent criticisms of abstract moral theories from Bernard Williams. See, for example, his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).
13. Here, too, Jacobi's view anticipates some more recent responses to scepticism. For example, some social epistemologists attempt to break out of the theoretical feed-back loop that generates scepticism by appealing to the function of epistemic concepts in social life. See Edward Craig *Knowledge and the State of Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). Another example can be found in debates about epistemic closure, where some have denied the principle, 'If, while knowing p, S believes q because S knows that p entails q, then S knows q'. See Fred Dretske 'Skepticism: what perception teaches', in Steven Luper (ed.) *The Skeptics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 105–118.
14. Jacobi makes a similar point in his open letter to Fichte of 1799: 'Whoever knows how *really* to elevate himself with his spirit above nature, with his heart about every degrading desire, such a one sees God face to face, and it is not enough to say of him that he only believes in God' (*MPW*, 520).
15. See John Henry Newman *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1979), 95–109.
16. See Gilbert Harman *Thought* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 157.
17. Jacobi's move towards this more naturalistic account is already present in the 1782 essay 'Something Lessing said: a commentary on *Journeys of the Popes*'. For an excellent English translation of this text, see James Schmidt (ed.) *What is Enlightenment: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1996), 191–211. It also appears in the preface to the 1792 version of Jacobi's philosophical novel, *Eduard Allwill's Collection of Letters*.
18. John Henry Newman *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford between AD 1826 and 1843* (Notre Dame IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1997), 203 (emphasis added).